
Student receives national accolade

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George Washington University was brimming with a passion for liberty this weekend, as more than 500 students from across the globe descended on Washington, D.C., for the fourth annual International Students For Liberty (SFL) Conference, hosted by GWU's Liberty Society. Taking home the award for Student of the Year was senior Michelle Fields, SFL campus coordinator for the L.A. area and president of the Pepperdine College Libertarians.



"It's so incredible, but I don't think I would have been able to be so active without the Pepperdine College Libertarians," Fields said of her award. "They're such dedicated individuals, so educated and willing to help out, and also, Students for Liberty provided me with so many resources and support. This is amazing."

Pepperdine Libertarians at the conference were delighted — and not entirely surprised — at Fields' achievement.

"Michelle's leadership has not only brought our group together and made a lot of things work," senior Allison McCarty said, "but it's shown us that we as individuals can be leaders, too."

"She deserved it. She has done so, so much," junior Chelsea Krafve added. "She's brought Pepperdine such a good name and done so much to make our school so well known and respected at that conference, even though we're a pretty small group."

Krafve, who was among of group of Pepperdine students to have dinner with prominent Libertarian spokesman John Stossel, praised the trip as inspirational and lauded SFL for affording opportunities to networking for summer internships, all in a group of people who share their passion.

Run entirely by students, SFL began in 2008, and their first conference hosted 100 students from 42

universities in three nations. The largest gathering of its kind in the world, this year's conference brought more speakers, workshops and networking opportunities for its attendees, who flew in from countries ranging from England to Nigeria. It was the highest attended conference yet, illustrating the wildfire of Libertarianism sweeping universities.

"We're a philosophy conservatives cannot ignore," Fields said. "Young students today aren't as neoconservative as older generations, and I think it's representative of the political climate now."

McCarty added that because the Democratic and Republican parties are in flux, a third party is being given more serious consideration in a typically two-party system.

"There's a lot of hope that we can stand up and say, 'Hey, this is what I believe; if you want my vote, come and take it,'" McCarty said. "The hope is that Democrats can become more fiscally astute and that Republicans can become less interventionist in their military policy and more responsive to social freedoms. This gives Libertarian people who were Libertarians all along a reason to reinvest themselves in politics."

SFL has been instrumental in helping students invest themselves in politics, providing year-round support to campus groups, helping them arrange for guest speakers and internship opportunities, and holding events of their own, such as October's smaller SFL conference held at Pepperdine. It has snowballed over the last three years with the help of social networking and increasing media attention.

And Pepperdine was no stranger to the media spotlight. Fields was a guest on Fox Business' "Freedom Watch" with Judge Andrew Napolitano, the "John Stossel Show" and the Reason Foundation's Reason.tv. She also conducted an interview with the Cato Institute.

The whole group of eight Pepperdine students and one alumnus attended the taping of the John Stossel show, in which Stossel and Cato Vice President David Boaz spoke to students and fielded questions from conference attendees. The Fox Business segment aired on Sunday, while the Reason clip and "STOSSEL" have yet to air.

Independent of media appearances at the conference, Fields and the group were something of a celebrity when they arrived, due in large part to the national attention garnered by last semester's Free Speech Wall, which was nominated for Student Event of the Year. Other contributors to their reputation were last semester's SFL conference at Pepperdine, prior media exposure and solid presence in Washington through Pepperdine's internship program and individual work experience.

"It's so strange that we have this sort of international following from the little events we do that they see on websites or in Facebook pictures," Fields added. "It's sort of surreal."

Fields and McCarty said that students from larger campuses with strong Libertarian presence, such as George Mason, explained that they were inspired to recreate the Free Speech Wall on their campus.

"I would have people come up to me and say, 'You guys are from Pepperdine? I love the work that you're doing! I've read articles about you and your story,'" McCarty said. "I think it really inspired all of us because we realized that all the small things we do on campus — other people around the world are watching, and they're paying attention."

But the pursuit of liberty and the accolades therein came at a price — midterm week.

"We may all fail midterms, but it would've been worth it," McCarty joked.

"But I think it shows how dedicated the Pepperdine College Libertarians are," Fields added. "That we're willing to sacrifice time and energy during this week to fly out there, network with people and talk about these ideas. It's pretty incredible that we have this group of individuals here and that everyone was taking note of Pepperdine at the conference in D.C. I loved that."

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